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2017

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Ylä-Anttila , T S S 2017 , ' Familiarity as a tool of populism : Political appropriation of shared experiences and the case of Suvivirsi ' , Acta Sociologica , vol. 60 , no. 4 , pp. 342-357 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699316679490>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/228243>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699316679490>

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# Familiarity as a tool of populism: Political appropriation of shared experiences and the case of *Suvivirsi*

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## Abstract

Populist argumentation claims to represent ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, appealing to emotions and reacting to a sense of crisis. By analysing a public debate in Finland in which populist arguments appropriate a culturally shared, familiar experience – that of singing *Suvivirsi*, the Summer Hymn – I argue that evoking familiarity is an effective way of ‘doing populism’. Analysing media texts from 2002 to 2014 and a questionnaire to political candidates in 2011, and using Laurent Thévenot’s sociology of engagements, the article shows that appeals to the familiarity of the hymn are particularly compatible with the populist valorization of the experience of the common people. Familiarity thus constitutes a central tool in the toolkit of populism. Remembering the shared experience of singing the hymn bonds the assumed ‘people’ together and gives an emotional charge to populist arguments. By drawing on pragmatist political sociology and analysing politics ‘in action’ in everyday disputes, the paper makes a novel contribution to the scholarship of populism.

## Keywords

Familiarity, justification, political sociology, populism, pragmatic sociology, right-wing populism, sociology of engagements

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## Introduction

Our summer is arriving and gentle winds will blow  
 We see our world reviving as grass and bushes grow  
 For Heaven always brings us  
 Both sun and soothing rain  
 Eternal hymns it sings us  
 And all is born again.

(First verse of *Suvivirsi*, translated by Helsingius, 2000.)

*Suvivirsi* (Summer Hymn), which pupils in Finnish schools traditionally sing in spring graduation ceremonies, has become a site of political struggle in 2000s Finland. Some question whether Christian hymns are appropriate in public schools, while others defend the cultural tradition. Others still emphasize its Finnishness and defend it against a cultural threat they claim is introduced by immigrants. Analysing this debate, I will show that populist argumentation can appropriate (take into use) the *familiarity* of cultural artefacts such as this hymn to effectively claim to represent ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’. This is because appealing to familiar experience, rather than more abstract political constructions such as values, is particularly compatible with the populist valorization of the common people.

By arguing that familiarity is a central tool in the toolkit of populism (see Swidler, 1986) – at least in Finnish political discourse, and in all likelihood, other instances of populism – I contribute to the literature on right-wing populist argumentation and especially its noted emotional tendency (Berezin, 2001, 2002; Canovan, 1999; Demertzis, 2006, 2014). This use of familiarity aims to conflate a ‘community of feeling’ – in this case, those participating in the song – with a nationalist political identity (Berezin, 2001, 2002). Also, I demonstrate that Laurent Thévenot’s sociology of engagements (Thévenot, 2001, 2007, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015) is a particularly useful theoretical framework for analysis of populism, since it distinguishes between *justification* and *familiarity* in a way that aptly describes nuances of populist argumentation. Thus, the article is an application of pragmatist political sociology to the analysis of populism – largely absent from previous, extensive studies on populism.

As empirical material, I use Finnish media texts from 2002 to 2014 and a questionnaire of political candidates’ opinions and justifications in 2011. Immigration was one of the key issues of the Finnish 2011 electoral campaign, and the right-wing populist (True) Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*)<sup>1</sup> gained a landslide victory – a development echoing those in several European countries (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Wodak et al., 2013) – with a nationalistic campaign, in which asserting the significance of cultural traditions such as *Suvivirsi* played its part.

*Suvivirsi* represents a valuable cultural symbol to some, while others see it as a religious practice. To many, it is a *familiar* practice enabling remembrance and tradition. For populist framing (Aslanidis, 2015), this shared familiarity of the song is vital. That familiarity can be used to anchor right-wing populist discourse in shared experience. I will argue that, through its familiarity, *Suvivirsi* provides a vessel to connect political argumentation to a solid base of everyday practices, which produce experiences of belonging, to bridge the gap between familiar experience and institutional politics. I will begin with a short introduction to the *Suvivirsi* debate.

## Suvivirsi, the Summer Hymn

Typically, *Suvivirsi* ends the ceremony held on the first Saturday of June in the school gym, after the handing out of report cards, marking the beginning of the summer holiday. The music teacher often plays

the piano or even a pump organ, leading the song, while proud parents and teachers stand up and join their offspring and students in a sing-along.

Curiously, with regards to the new-found nationalist usage of the song, the hymn is of Swedish origin. It was popularized in Finland after the great famine of 1695–1697 (Lappalainen, 2012) and thanks God for the awakening of nature and a coming harvest in springtime. In agrarian Nordic societies, this was a significant yearly event. The hymn's lyrics mention 'growing crops in the valleys' and 'thy blessed gifts that the land and sea bear for us'. As a seasonal rite, it holds great significance for many Finns. If you ask a Finn, they will typically say 'everyone' in Finland knows it by heart – since 'everyone' has sung it every spring as schoolchildren. Parents are reintroduced to the tradition each spring.

However, the definition of 'everyone' participating in this cultural ritual is not as unambiguous as would seem at face value. While the strong position of the Lutheran church has meant that Finnish traditions often are Christian in nature (Kallio, 2015), Suvivirsi has become controversial as the country is becoming more and more multicultural and secular. The church and the state school system have been some of the strongest institutions in Finnish society, which explains the saliency of this debate. The school system is near-universal and a matter of national pride: more than 97% of children attend state schools (Statistics Finland, 2014), they are ranked by a majority of Finns as 'the most significant thing about Finland's history', and education is seen as an asset to the nation (Torsti, 2012: 99–101, 109). Membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church was until recently also near-universal: as high as 95.0% in 1970, but declining to 75.2% in 2014 (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, 2006, 2014) because of immigration and secularization. On the other hand, large-scale immigration to Finland started relatively late, in the early 1990s, and is likely to continue – public debates on multiculturalism, however, are still in their infancy, and the debatable conception of a historically homogenous and united Finnish people is overemphasized in nationalist arguments (Lehtonen, 2009).

The Suvivirsi debate has previously been interpreted from the viewpoint of discursive cultural-essentialist Othering of the out-group (Leppänen, 2002; also see Sakki and Pettersson, 2016; Wood and Finlay, 2008), and there is literature on emotional collective narratives of shared history (e.g. Liu and Hilton, 2005; Mols and Jetten, 2014; Wodak and Forchtner, 2014). However, instead of the narrative of Suvivirsi and what it *represents*, I focus on the argumentative power resulting from the mere *familiarity* of singing it, and how populist argumentation can 'tap into' such everyday experiences, reaffirming its defence of the people in the process. Such populist argumentation has, in recent years, increasingly been brought to the fore by the (True) Finns Party, which I will introduce next.

## The (True) Finns Party and populism in action

The (True) Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*) shocked the Finnish electoral scene in the general election of 2011 by coming in third place, shattering the decades-long stability of the so-called Big Three (Social Democrats, conservative National Coalition and agrarian Centre Party) alternating in power (Arter, 2010; Borg, 2012; Ylä-Anttila, 2014; Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio, in press; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015). It entered government with the Centre Party and the National Coalition in 2015. The party is self-avowedly 'nationalist', 'Christian-social' and 'populist' (Finns Party, 2011: 6). They define populism as a mode of democracy based on rule of the people *as a nation* instead of rule by 'international elite bureaucracy' (Finns Party, 2011: 7). While it has roots in the agrarian populist Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue* (SMP), 1959–1995), it has moved from a defence of the rural poor to a full-fledged right-wing populism, converging with Nordic parties from different (right-liberal or neo-fascist) roots – the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party and the Progress Party of Norway (Jungar and Jupskås, 2014; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015). Rhetorically, the party often looks to find comfort in the past: nostalgically referencing a lost community where things were simpler, familiar and firmly rooted in the perceived organic national community (Arter, 2010; Pykkönen, 2011; Ylä-Anttila, 2014). In its name and politics, the party exclaims the virtue of being 'just an ordinary down-to-earth Finn' (see also Rapley, 1998). It is Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, socially conservative and increasingly

right-wing in its economics as well – altogether, a right-wing populist party (Arter, 2010; Jungar and Jupskås, 2014; Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015).

However, while the rise of the (True) Finns is generally taken as the primary indicator of the rise of populism in Finland, populism surely is not something only ‘populist’ parties engage in. Moreover, the concept of ‘populism’ is notoriously debated. Is it an ideology, a strategy, a style, a rhetoric, a discourse, a logic or something else (for an overview, see Aslanidis, 2015)? The fact that it is often used pejoratively in everyday talk does not help. However, as the (True) Finns Party are proudly ‘populist’, there should be no issue in addressing them as such. Moreover, in the definition struggle of populism, what matters is whether the concept is of analytical use. Paris Aslanidis (2015) has convincingly argued that it is indeed, if we conceptualize it as a *discursive frame* (see also e.g. Benford and Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Snow and Benford 1988), an ‘*anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People*’ (Aslanidis, 2015: 9). Populist framing posits a ‘pure’, sovereign people against a ‘corrupt’ elite and, in the case of right-wing populism, often excludes certain Others from ‘the people’ (see Sakki and Pettersson (2016) for a comparison of Othering in Finnish and Swedish right-wing populist discourses).

Thus, crucially, to be populist is to use populist framing, and populism is a matter of degree, not either/or. Some have even suggested populism to be measurable in quantity from party documents (see Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011).<sup>2</sup> To be clear, in this view, there is no clear division between ‘populist’ and ‘non-populist’ political actors. The populist frame may be employed strategically (Aslanidis, 2015: 12–13), but actors also interpret their experience through it (Aslanidis, 2015: 12, also see Goffman, 1974). I do not label and study ‘a populist party’ or ‘populists’, but *doing populism* (see also Jansen, 2011), in which politicians and laymen may engage when discussing and acting out politics, if and when they engage in a valorization of the ‘common people’ and a denigration of ‘corrupt elites’. This understanding of populism is based on social movement studies, which take a much broader view of ‘politics’ than a traditional political-scientific view of (party) politics, including everyday discussions and actions of politically engaged citizens. Further, it is based on pragmatist sociological theorizing, which focuses on observable *action* and *habits*, without making assumptions about the underlying motivations or ideological values of social actors (see e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Joas and Knöbl, 2009: 500–528).

Populist argumentation has been noted to have a strong emotional component (Berezin, 2001, 2002; Canovan, 1999; Demertzis, 2006, 2014) and to often follow from a sense of crisis (Aslanidis, 2015: 12; Taggart, 2004: 275). I will argue that one particularly salient way of doing populism – to react to a ‘crisis’ by making emotional anti-elitist appeals in the name of ‘the people’ – is to appeal to familiar experience politically. This is because using familiarity-based arguments in the public sphere, and thus implicitly demanding their acceptance and legitimacy, lends particular potency to populist argumentation. Laurent Thévenot’s sociology of engagements provides my theoretical framework for this analysis.

## Sociology of engagements

Laurent Thévenot’s sociology of engagements starts with justification theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006), which describes *worlds of justification*. These are conventionalized value-systems, which conceptualize what is considered worthy on different fields of social interaction – and by extension, which arguments are seen as legitimate in public discussion concerning those fields (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 364). For example, when buying and selling on markets, people implicitly agree that the worth of goods is measured by the market mechanism (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 372, 2006: 43–61, 193–203) – thus arguments based on market value are most legitimate, and appeals to other kinds of legitimacy, such as family ties, would be considered inappropriate nepotism. In contrast, in the world of domestic relations, traditional hierarchies such as family ties are what matters (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 370, 2006: 90–98, 164–178). References to these shared valuation systems are used in disputes in everyday situations and political debates, whenever a *crisis* creates the *imperative to justify* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 359–360) – the worlds are conventionalized ways to legitimize arguments

(Thévenot, 2001: 71). In the case of Suvivirsi, the most central justificatory dispute is whether the hymn should be evaluated as a cultural tradition or religious practice.

However, clearly, not all social action takes the form of settling disputes by appealing to higher common principles. Thévenot has added a ‘vertical’ (Thévenot, 2007: 418) dimension to justification theory, forming a *sociology of engagements* of different levels of engagements. Here, the *regime of justification* is conceptualized as one *regime of engagement with the world* – the other pertinent regime, for this article, being the *regime of familiarity*. When in familiar surroundings, people can act based on habit, without critical reflection on the value-basis of their actions (as would be necessary for justification), while maintaining a feeling of ease (Thévenot, 2007: 416, 2011b: 14–16, 2014: 13–15, 19–28). Here, the underlying pragmatist philosophy is evident (see also Thévenot, 2001). Objects we engage with in the familiar regime, which can be material or cultural artefacts (see also e.g. Latour, 2005), and which Thévenot calls *common-places*, are invested with a ‘strongly personal engagement’ and breed ‘confidence’ (Thévenot, 2011a: 49). They ‘are not merely symbols, or signs, because they are the vehicle for deeply personal attachments’ (Thévenot, 2014: 20). Familiarity is perhaps best described ‘by the phrase: “inhabiting a home”’ (Thévenot, 2001: 69). We have a personal relationship with our everyday material and cultural surroundings, we are *used to them*. Suvivirsi is a prime example of a common-place.

Such familiar engagement using common-places can take the form of political action, even though it is ‘not taken into account in most approaches to politics’ (Thévenot, 2014: 10). Common-places can even be ‘instrumental in support of authoritarian power’ (Thévenot, 2015: 98), since they are ‘by construction, rather foreign to strangers’ (Thévenot, 2015: 98) – while they form a strong bond between those who share them, they also exclude strangers. This, as well, is apparent in the Suvivirsi debate, and is what gives Suvivirsi its exclusionary power. In the Suvivirsi debate, two solutions to the crisis emerge: that of *justification* (appeals to shared values) and that of a return to *familiarity* (appeals based on an experience shared by a community). The latter is more compatible with populism, because it constructs a people around the common-place and valorizes the felt experience of the people participating. This is the analytical dichotomy I will employ. First, however, I will present some examples of empirical research using the concept of familiarity.

## Empirical usage

Empirical research on familiarity at work in politics includes studies on disputes over public urban space in Russia (Lonkila, 2011), workers union activists in Belgium (Charles, 2012), environmental conflicts in Italy (Centemeri, 2015), urban ecological activists in Denmark (Blok and Meilvagn, 2015) and city-planning controversy in Japan (Blok, 2015). Also, feminist scholars have noted that in care work, familiar engagements are crucial – not just the official, measurable requirements of work (Thévenot, 2011a: 58). The feminist slogan of ‘the personal is political’ thus connects to this concept of familiarity – both highlight the importance of a personal level excluded from public, rationalized politics. This leads to one of two empirical examples I will briefly discuss.

First, Anna Colin Lebedev (2012) studies the *Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia*, an NGO representing the relatives of soldiers in the Russian army. They complain about the mistreatment experienced by the soldiers, but in order for their appeals to appear legitimate before the Russian authorities, they need to be reformulated as human rights abuses. They have to be re-framed as breaches of generally agreed principles – *justified* – instead of presented as mothers’ personal worries, which would remain in the *regime of familiarity*. The soldiers’ mothers study legal texts and write official letters translating the mothers’ worries into the language of legal contestation. Particular emotional grievances are raised onto the level of public societal action, making them legitimate. In the Suvivirsi debate, the situation is quite opposite, as I will show: populist arguments demand that familiarity is accepted as a legitimate political argument. This is where familiarity-based arguments’ populist appeal culminates: they valorize felt experiences over the value-systems of establishment politics.

**Table 1.** Theoretical framework (adapted from Thévenot, 2001: 76, 2014: 13).

	What is 'good'?	How are material and cultural objects engaged with?	How is this visible in empirical material?
Regime of justification	Conventionalized and generalized common goods: worlds of justification, which can be appealed to publicly	Justifications can be tested against them	Implicit or explicit references to common value-systems: cultural or religious heritage
Regime of familiarity	Feeling of ease, comfort and 'home' in habituated action	As intimate common-places, which make ease and comfort in familiarity possible	References to the concrete experience of singing the hymn and the emotions it evokes

Second, and importantly for the Suvivirsi case, Serguei Oushakine (2011) argues that songs 'act as acoustic and narrative containers capable of evoking or accommodating forms of collective sensibility' (Oushakine, 2011: 249) – they can be common-places, in Thévenot's (2014: 21–22) words. Oushakine vividly describes Russian patriotic concerts in which war songs are performed to honour veterans, with audiences standing up and joining the performers in song, in a 'collective impulse affectively orchestrated by the song' (Oushakine, 2011: 263). Such a 'collective impulse' is what discussants try to appropriate in the Suvivirsi debate.

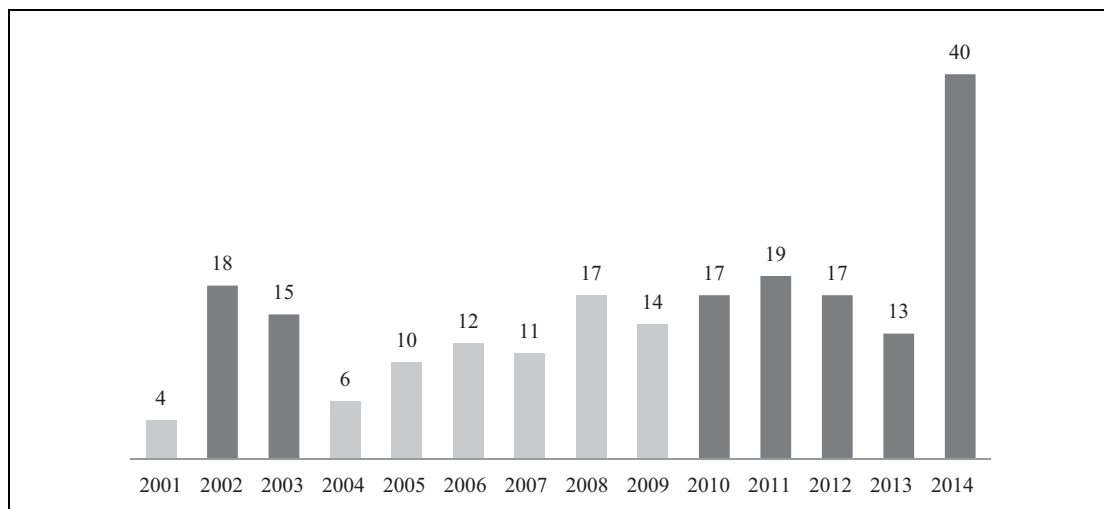
Thus, to analyse the Suvivirsi dispute on the basis of Thévenot's sociology of engagements (summarized in Table 1), I coded my material with the Atlas.TI software for qualitative analysis, looking for *justifications* for arguments based on value-systems and separating them from arguments based on *familiarity*. For example, when a discussant argued that Suvivirsi *should be sung because it has been done for decades*, this argument was coded as *justification* based on the generally accepted value of *cultural traditions*. On the other hand, when discussants referred to *the concrete situation or the experience of singing the song and the emotions it evokes*, the argument was coded as based on *familiarity*. The line between worlds of justification and familiarity was often blurred and interpretation is not clear-cut. Still, they did emerge as distinct arguments, as I will show.

Analyses of Finnish politics have identified it as emphasizing the regime of justification, especially the worth of efficiency (Lonkila, 2011; Luhtakallio, 2012; Ylä-Anttila, 2010), and private interests (Eranti, 2014, in press). Thus, I hypothesize that when actors use the populist frame, which proclaims to bring the everyday grievances of 'the ordinary people' into politics, opposing elite bureaucracy, they will employ the regime of familiarity particularly often, and that there is a particular discursive connection between the populist frame and the regime of familiarity. I will show that this indeed is the case by analysing media materials and a questionnaire for political candidates, materials which I will present next.

## Materials

*Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), the largest daily national newspaper in Finland, has been one of the main arenas of the Suvivirsi dispute, as it tends to be for political debate in Finland. A search for 'suvivir\*' in HS 2001–2014 returns 213 articles, editorials and opinion pieces, which fall roughly into two waves: 2002–2003, when the Religious Freedom Act was being revised, and 2010–2014, marked by an immigration debate and the rise of the (True) Finns Party (see Figure 1). I selected these two waves, adding up to 139 pieces. This material gives an overview of the public debate on Suvivirsi.

To include politicians, I analysed candidates' responses to the HS Voting Advice Application (VAA) (HS 6 April 2011) in the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2011, the event of the (True) Finns Party's breakthrough. The web-based VAA gives voting suggestions based on a political questionnaire, but also



**Figure 1.** Pieces in *Helsingin Sanomat* mentioning Suvivirsi 2001–2014, analysed years in dark grey.

creates a comprehensive dataset of the argumentation of party candidates. The VAA is a popular way for candidates to communicate with voters. 1820 of 2315 total parliamentary candidates (78.6%) responded to the question: ‘Should Suvivirsi be sung at schools’ spring festivities?’ I analysed comments ( $N = 358$ ) from the four largest parties: the conservative National Coalition, the agrarian Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the right-wing populist (True) Finns Party. This material shows how politicians ‘tap into’ the familiarity of Suvivirsi in their argumentation. First, however, let us turn to the media debate.

## The public debate on Suvivirsi in *HS*

The hymn’s cultural significance is illustrated in *HS* by recurrent references to it. The ending of the school year is typically noted by a small news piece: ‘Suvivirsi will soon ring out in Finnish schools to mark the beginning of summer’ (News, 27 May 2002, quotes translated by author). An ice-hockey team that lost a tournament was ‘seen off to summer holidays by Suvivirsi’ (sung by fans of the opposing team, Sports, 24 March 2003). Even a new medical implant for the hearing-impaired is introduced by telling the story of second-grader Tuulia, who, thanks to the implant, ‘can now join the others in singing Suvivirsi’ (News, 31 May 2003).

However, on 30 May 2002, a reader, ‘grandmother’ by title, writes in the opinion section that she is ‘deeply concerned’ over the fact that some kindergartens had omitted Suvivirsi from their spring ceremonies ‘because there were a few Muslims amongst the children’. A few opinions agree with her in the following days. On 4 June, another reader, this time a teacher, references a column in *Opettaja* (*Teacher*) magazine on 31 May, which misinterprets a new draft for the Religious Freedom Act as banning Suvivirsi. The teacher is strongly opposed to this. Håkan Mattlin, administrative director of the Ministry of Education, quickly writes to correct, stating on 6 June 2002 that ‘Suvivirsi will not be silenced’ (Opinion, 6 June 2002). The proposed legislation only ensures that students may opt out of religious ceremonies.

Between 2002 and 2014, there are no actual calls in *HS* to ban Suvivirsi, and there are repeated assurances by officials that it will indeed not be banned (Constitutional Law Committee, 2002, 2014; Deputy Chancellor of Justice, 2014; Deputy Parliamentary Ombudsman, 2014; *HS*, 22 September 2003, 16 March 2006, 8 August 2013, 4 April 2014, 25 April 2014, 26 April 2014; National Board of Education, 2006, 2014; Religious Freedom Committee, 2001). Despite this, the bulk of the debate consists of angry arguments vehemently opposing a supposedly looming ban. In 2014, more than 3000 members of the public even attend a ‘Save the Suvivirsi’ event to sing the song on Töölöntori



square in Helsinki (IS, 31 May 2014). Mere rumours are immediately opposed: 'I heard that an EU directive forbids singing the fourth verse of Suvivirsi in schools, since it mentions Jesus!' (Opinion, 10 November 2002).

## Justification

In total, I located 67 appeals to worlds of justification and 33 appeals to familiarity in the 139 documents of the *HS* material on Suvivirsi. There were no notable differences between the timeframes of 2002–2003 and 2010–2014. The majority of the debate focused on whether Suvivirsi should be identified as belonging to the world of 'culture' or 'religion', and then justifying opinions by referring to the worth of Suvivirsi in that world. These multiple worlds were also recognized by discussants, such as this one, who asserts that Suvivirsi can be interpreted as a prayer, a cultural tradition or something else, critically distancing himself from the debate:

One of the signs of spring is the debate over whether singing Suvivirsi in school festivities is religious practice. There is no one right answer to this question: to one Suvivirsi may be a prayer, to another a beautiful tradition and yet to another neither of these. There is no objectively right answer. (Opinion, 6 April 2014)

Suvivirsi is often described in the material as 'a part of our cultural heritage' (Opinion, 29 May 2014). This is a justification appealing to an assumed shared understanding that cultural traditions have worth. Even a church official defined the hymn as 'part of Finnish culture' (Opinion, 28 March 2014) and not constituting religious practice. Others noted that 'it's a part of our national cultural heritage despite its religious background' (Opinion, 15 April 2014).

Many discussants presented Finnish culture as the norm and immigrants as a homogeneous Other, who 'should not be allowed to change our traditions' (Opinion, 30 May 2002). They argued it is 'insulting' to 'have to live with Muslims who despise our religion' (quote from letter to Chancellor of Justice reported in *HS*, 25 April 2014). The abandonment of Suvivirsi was portrayed as symptomatic of a long-standing moral decline 'insulting the values of the majority, trampling on women's rights, silent acceptance of genital mutilation and honour violence' (Opinion, 28 February 2011). Such argumentation often echoed a cultural-essentialist view, which sees cultures as unchanging and distinct features of groups (e.g. Hopkins et al., 1997). The 'ethno-pluralist' belief that these cultures should be preserved by preventing them from mixing is typical of European right-wing populist argumentation (Betz and Johnson, 2004; Spektorowski, 2003; Taguieff, 1993; Wren, 2001). However, cultural essentialism can also be used to defend multiculturalism (which 'emphasizes equality between and respect for the pluralism of cultures and group identities', Verkuyten, 2007: 280), as noted by Maykel Verkuyten (2003) and exemplified in this quote, in which the discussant states that 'cultures' should respect each other, but still clearly delineates between their distinct traditions:

When the Lutheran mainstream culture celebrates Easter, for example, Muslim children should be asked to join. Reciprocity is important: this is why it should be appropriately noted in schools and kindergartens when Muslims in their turn celebrate Ramadan. (Opinion, 3 June 2002)

Altogether, the justification based on cultural heritage constituted the primary tone of the debate. Others defined Suvivirsi as religious instead of cultural, and either defended or criticized it on those grounds. It was seen as 'a sung prayer' (interview with Deputy Chancellor of Justice, 4 April 2014) and 'a Christian tradition' (News, 28 June 2012). A bishop denied his children attendance to their school's spring ceremony because it did *not* include Suvivirsi (News Story, 5 June 2012), and it was argued that 'raising a child in a religious vacuum' (Opinion, 28 March 2010) would be detrimental to their development. These arguments are based on the claim that religious tradition is an important shared value-system.

**Table 2.** Appeals to worlds of justification and familiarity in the Voting Advice Application comments ( $N = 358$ ).

	Centre Party	(True) Finns Party	National Coalition	Social Democrats
Appeals to worlds of justification	63	44	52	40
Appeals to familiarity	7	24	13	11

## *Familiarity*

A newspaper is not the most conducive medium for emotional expressions of familiarity, and it is conventional to justify arguments by general principles. Nevertheless, discussants reminisced about their experiences of singing *Suvisirsi* as schoolchildren, and noted how singing the song now arouses ‘feelings of nostalgia’ (Column, 11 May 2014). The singing of *Suvisirsi* was described as ‘beautiful and tender’ (Opinion, 1 June 2011), something ‘most Finns have experiences of’ (interview of Deputy Chancellor of Justice, 4 April 2014), even ‘a part of the shared experience of many generations’ (Opinion, 29 May 2014). The hymn contains ‘a powerful emotional charge’ (interview with Deputy Chancellor of Justice, 4 April 2014) which can elicit even physical responses: it can ‘move’ you (News, 26 December 2015) and ‘make you weep’ (News, 26 December 2015), cause ‘shivers’ (Column, 21 July 2013) and ‘make your heart pound’ (News, 3 June 2011). Such expressions do not appeal to a shared cultural value-system but a shared *familiar experience* – crucial to claiming that this is what ‘the people’ feel, as also shown by the quotes above about ‘most Finns’ and the ‘shared experience of generations’.

## **Politicians appropriating *Suvisirsi***

I now turn to a medium that is less formal and filtered: an online VAA for political candidates. The cultural and religious justifications seen in the media debate were reflected here as well (with 199 appeals to worlds of justification), but familiarity was also salient (with 55 appeals) – particularly for (True) Finns Party candidates (with 24 appeals), as can be seen from Table 2.

## *Justification*

Many candidates refer to the implicitly shared and understood worth of cultural traditions, for example: ‘It is an essential part of Finnish cultural heritage’ (65, M, Finns Party). Indeed, the most common justification again is that the hymn is ‘cultural heritage’ – implying a shared understanding that cultural heritage is valuable in and of itself. Again, culture is often presented in an essentialist sense, as an unchanging and distinct feature of groups: ‘Schools can continue to carry Finnish traditions, but should also teach about other religious traditions’ (47, F, Social Democrat). Many candidates believe that ‘they’ will also respect the fact that ‘we’ hold on to our traditions: ‘National culture is important, and when carried out with poise, others will also respect our practices’ (57, M, Centre Party).

The religious content of the hymn is debated in the VAA as well. However, when candidates directly address voters, if they place *Suvisirsi* in the world of religious justification and assume the reader to share the valuation of this world, they can use more overtly religious justifications than discussants in the newspaper opinion pages. Here, a religious justification is tightly intertwined with nationalism as well: ‘If you don’t have Home, Christ and Fatherland, what you have is room for Satan’ (63, M, Finns Party).

The threat to *Suvisirsi* was located in ‘Muslims’, ‘immigrants’, ‘foreigners’, ‘minorities’, ‘other religions’, ‘other cultures’, ‘outsiders’, ‘other people’, ‘others’ or just ‘them’ – this was especially characteristic of (True) Finns Party comments. It has been previously noted that, in their 2011 manifesto, the (True) Finns Party engaged in a discourse of ‘superior, self-evident and natural Finnishness’ built on its stark separation from Others (Pyykkönen, 2011). In the following quote, the candidate discusses the value of cultural traditions in an aggressive ‘if you don’t like it here, move out’ fashion. Immigrants,

equated here with refugees ('I understand immigrants have come here to get help') are accused of 'trying to take over the country' by supposedly forcing the Finnish majority to change their traditions.

If our tradition is offensive to someone, he/she should move to a country whose traditions don't offend him/her. I understand immigrants have come here to get help. Why are they trying to take over the country. (58, F, Finns Party)

## Familiarity

While text is not necessarily the most conducive medium for expression of emotion, it can be done, perhaps with capital letters and multiple exclamation and question marks:

If Finns have to look at the religious dress of Muslims and the subordination of women under the guise of religion, so we can without worry sing Suvivirsi once a year! IS THIS QUESTION SOME SORT OF JOKE??? (53, F, Finns Party)

In quotes like these, the issue of opposing immigration, and morally condemning the claimed cultural habits of Muslims, takes primary importance. However, the heartfelt emotional familiarity of the song is clearly powerful. The candidate quoted above seems to genuinely feel insulted by the potential 'loss' of the experience – it is not just about the song itself, but the continued practice of singing it 'once a year' – and for this candidate, this should count as an argument, without need for further justification. This proposition is so unfathomable to the candidate it can only be interpreted as a 'joke' – her experience should render any need for justification unnecessary. A similar sentiment is echoed by many other candidates. For example: 'Totally unbelievable that someone would even question this' (57, M, Finns Party).

As the song represents something familiar, the candidates see the practice of their offspring continuing this tradition as a touching gesture of the succession of generations. The meaning of the song cannot be grasped by referring to its lyrical contents or even the generalized values of Christianity or Finnishness it is claimed to represent. Candidates talk about the *habit*, its *familiarity*, and the *comfort* this brings: 'it feels familiar and expresses the coming of the spring' (63, M, Social Democrat), or: 'The best thing about the school spring ceremony was Suvivirsi' (56, F, Social Democrat). Such claims do not adhere to the regime of justification, where reference to abstract common goods is made. Instead, the emotional experiences referenced by respondents indicate that the 'good' carried by the song is strongly attached to the very experience of singing it with others at a specific event (the semester-ending ceremony) held at a specific place (the school), a specific age (childhood) and a specific time of year (spring). They reminisce about the sound of the pump organ and the smell of spring, visceral bodily experiences that cannot be conveyed by referring to principles of justification, only by appealing to the familiarity of the common-place – to those that share that familiarity – the 'people' of their populism. 'I believe *everyone* knows it by heart', as one candidate put it (47, M, Social Democrat, emphasis added). The emotional experience of this cultural habit is tied to the concrete situation, via personal attachment to a common-place, not just discursive descriptions of it. 'Tapping into' this experience is a politicization of the everyday experience of the 'common people', not in need of justification. It is non-negotiable, quite literally: political debate or deliberation about it is *impossible*. One respondent simply typed: 'Give me a break!!' (45, M, Finns Party), while another noted 'That's it' (58, F, Finns Party).

When talking about their familiar attachments, in contrast to the justification of the value-system of 'national traditions', the respondents make reference to the personal experience of hearing the song 'echoed in Finnish schools, filling hearts with emotion when nature blooms' (65, M, Finns Party). The remembrance of once singing the song as pupils themselves, to mark the beginning of summer, overwhelms them with emotion even today. The implication is that one cannot truly understand the significance and meaning of the song unless one has heard it and participated in the springtime ritual. The

common-place is similar to Paul Taggart's (2004) notion of the 'heartland' as a central concept for populists: it 'represents an idealized conception of the community they serve', and 'heartlands are something that is felt rather than reasoned' (Taggart, 2004: 274) – they are *familiar*:

Suvivirsi draws thoughts to summer even if school days were a long time ago. (49, F, Finns Party)

I don't understand who's offended by Suvivirsi? I'm not particularly religious myself and still I always wait for Suvivirsi to bring tears to eyes. (38, F, Social Democrat)

It still brings tears to my eyes when I sing it. This I want to be continued and this feeling I hope will be passed to children. (42, F, National Coalition)

Two respondents, both Finns Party candidates, even entered the first few lines of the song ('*Jo joutui armas aika...*') as their comment on the issue, as if they were singing it behind their keyboards, highlighting the ability of this experience to tie together those and only those who have participated in it (Berezin, 2001, 2002; Oushakine, 2011; Thévenot, 2011b: 18). This shared common ground brings with it a feeling of security, of being tied to one's familiar surroundings (Thévenot, 2011b: 8). This brings us to my concluding discussion.

## Discussion

As noted, one of the most common observations about populism is that it is 'a reaction to a sense of extreme crisis' (Taggart, 2004: 275, see also Aslanidis, 2015: 12). The populist reaction can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the imperative for justification created by such a crisis. Instead, populism turns back to the heartlands and common-places of pre-justification familiarity – in this case, the supposed homogeneous national community 'before multiculturalism' – to fix the crisis by returning to times before it happened, before habits had to be justified, when one could navigate worldly complexities based on familiarity, and 'sing the song as it has always been sung', instead of engaging in a public debate over plural orders of worth. By writing comments based on personal familiar experience, the analysed discussants demand the acceptance of their experience as 'common people' in the sphere of politics, without need for justification by value-systems, let alone politicians, bureaucrats or other authorities.

Coming back to Berezin's (2001: 83) argument that 'political identities are [...] distant from the concerns of "ordinary life" [...]. Political identities are public identities. They frequently take second place to more deeply felt private identities', we can argue that this is the gap that populist appeals to *familiarity* attempt to bridge: they aim to conflate the *community of feeling*, those who feel the familiarity, with a nationalist *political identity* (Berezin, 2001, 2002). Indeed, according to Berezin, the most effective political usage of communities of feeling is to appropriate existing ones, as when British Prime Minister Tony Blair labelled Princess Diana as the 'People's Princess' at time of her death, 'to infuse his Labour Party with Diana's charisma' (Berezin, 2002: 40). Similarly, in the case at hand, populist arguments appropriate the familiarity of Suvivirsi and claim that it is threatened by immigrants – to infuse exclusionary nationalist demands with the feeling of familiarity, and exclude from 'the people' those who do not share the feeling. While Suvivirsi is not nationalist *as a song*, and neither is the school spring ceremony explicitly formulated to foster *national* belonging, the ritual creates a community of feeling, a shared experience bonding its participants together. By giving this shared emotional experience a nationalist meaning, the 'deeply felt private identity' (Berezin, 2001), arising from belonging in the community that sings the song, is conflated with a political, public identity.

Thévenot (2014: 10) argues that the regime of familiar engagements 'is not taken into account in most approaches to politics and participation in public spaces or arenas'. Similarly, Lonkila (2011: 31) states that the typical Finnish expectation, of requiring all political arguments to operate on a publicly justified

level of generality, has led to neglecting some research questions and themes. Clearly, politicization that appeals to *familiarity* as an argument in itself requires analysis on that level, not merely on the level of abstract values and ideologies.

However, contrary to a Laclauian conception of populism (e.g. Laclau, 2005a, 2005b) focusing on ‘empty’ and ‘floating signifiers’, with no particular content, which are imbued with suitable meanings for the particular demand at hand, my analysis of the situatedness of populist symbols in a concrete familiar experience points out that these signifiers are sometimes not ‘floating’ or ‘empty’ – on the contrary, in this case, they are strongly connected to spatial, physical, concrete and familiar experiences which enable them to carry a strong weight and emotional power to be harnessed in populist argumentation, constructing *a people* against perceived threats. These arguments would not have such impact without the familiarity of Suvivirsi, and Suvivirsi could not be harnessed as easily to a non-populist cause because of the inherent connection of the ritual to a construction of ‘the people’.

In this paper, I have analysed the political appropriation of familiar experiences by populist arguments. Such politics emphasizes personal familiarity felt by ‘the people’ towards particular common-places. Examples of this were found in political candidates’ and citizens’ comments in a public debate, in their appeals to the familiarity of Suvivirsi. The appeals hinge on a shared common-place, the school spring semester ending ceremony and the shared experience of singing the hymn as a schoolchild. In understanding right-wing populist argumentation, this should be taken into account: it is quite different to argue the importance of national traditions as a generalized value than it is to appeal to a familiar experience of singing a traditional hymn. In the latter case, inclusion in the group, the members of which share the familiarity of this experience, is high on impossible to achieve for ‘outsiders’. This is a populist and exclusionary politicization of the familiar experience of ‘the common people’, to which ‘everyone’ participating in the debate is falsely assumed to belong.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of the Helsinki Research Group for Political Sociology (HEPO), especially my PhD supervisor Eeva Luhtakallio, the organizers and participants of the International Sociological Association’s Worldwide Competition for Junior Sociologists 2014, especially Professor Habibul Khondker, participants in numerous conference workshops, and five anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: I am grateful to the Kone Foundation for funding this research and to *Helsingin Sanomat* for making their Voting Advice Application data open to the public.

## Notes

1. The first part of the party name, *perus*, refers to a fundamental ordinariness, with the latter part, *suomalaiset*, meaning Finns. They previously used the translation True Finns but adopted the official English name The Finns in August 2011, after receiving international media attention (*HS*, 21 August 2011).
2. Rooduijn and Pauwels’ approach is very compatible with the one taken here, since they measure populism in party discourse, that is, observable populism ‘in action’ in politics. This is clearly distinct from Akkerman et al.’s (2014) approach of measuring populist attitudes in voters, that is, as an assumed attribute of individuals, which is not in the focus of this paper.

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